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SUBJECT: EMERGING MAURITANIAN "SOFT" COUNTERTERRORISM
STRATEGY

A complementarily of Counterterrorism Strategies in
Mauritania

¶1. (SBU) Both the Government of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania (GIRM) and the U.S. have chosen similar paths to fight the root causes of terrorism in Mauritania. In April 2008, the GIRM developed an draft Action Plan addressing &Social and Economic Aspects of the National Strategy Against Terror⁸ (Strategie Nationale de Lutte contre le Terrorisme, or SNLT), which lays out plans for social and economic integration of Mauritanian at-risk youth. A large portion of the plan centers on a communications strategy targeting that population. USAID,s Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) initiative parallels the GIRM,s SNLT, but goes a step further.

Mauritania,s National CT Strategy

¶2. (SBU) In February 2008, following a string of alleged terrorist attacks in the south (Aleg, December 2007), in the north (military compound killing, December/Jan 2008) and in the capital Nouakchott (Israeli Embassy /VIP Nightclub, March 200), the then Prime Minister Zeine Ould Zeidane requested his cabinet to develop the SNLT to better prepare the nation for potential future attacks. Three inter-ministerial commissions formed to develop the SNLT) one focusing on prevention, one on reaction, and one on consequences of terrorist attacks, such as psychological impact. The outcome of their work has been a draft Action Plan addressing the social and economic aspects of the SNLT which was provided to the Embassy by the Ministry of Economy and Finance that was charged with coordinating the response of the various non-security ministries. This strategy remains in draft. With the May change of Prime Ministers and ensuing political tumult in June, the Government has yet to move forward on this "soft" counterterrorism strategy or the corresponding "hard" strategy (focused on military, intelligence and law enforcement operations) that has not been shared with Embassy.

¶3. (SBU) The GIRM, through its SNLT Action Plan, identifies several drivers or root causes of terrorism in Mauritania. These are: 1) social injustice, or lack of equal opportunity for employment, education, training, and access to credit or other financing; 2) poverty, or lack of sufficient revenues

for subsistence needs, particularly in the face of the current price hike for basic necessities; 3) prevalence of precariousness among certain groups to be co-opted by criminal groups; 4) weakness of the educational system leading to high rates of illiteracy, and exposes the ignorant population to deviance; 5) high rate of unemployment and a exodus of rural populations towards the urban areas; and 6) erroneous interpretation of religious principles.

14. (SBU) To address the growing threat of extremism, the GIRM,s SNLT Action Plan proposes the following five prevention strategies: 1) Develop information campaigns on the terrorism phenomenon; 2) Reinforce GIRM,s governance capacity, especially for that of the justice sector and prisons; 3) Promote employment initiatives for economically disadvantaged youth, including vocational training and income generating activities; 4) Eliminate terrorist financing through improved financial investigation techniques and specialized training for financial inspectors, analysts and others; and 5) Develop synergies within the public sector to help identify and combat extremist behavior. Ministry of Economy and Finance Director for Cooperation Mohedyne Sidi Baba, who has been the Mission's primary counterpart on USAID's Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership, told EmbOffs that the deliberations within the non-security ministries had quickly followed the same general strategies he had seen developed in the USAID program.

USAID TSCTP project in Mauritania

15. (U) USAID,s TSCTP project strategy consists of: discrediting extremist ideologies; empowering at-risk youth both in the community and in the economy; and supporting more accountable and effective governance in at-risk urban and peri-urban slums. This will be done through activities targeting: youth integration in local government and civil society decision-making; vocational training and micro-enterprise grants; and promotion of interfaith dialogue, including potential traditional Islamic education, or mahadras, sector support to strengthen moderate voices.

2008 USAID Counterterrorism Assessment

16. (U) The SNLT has many of the same conclusions developed by USAID as a result of its 2005 and 2006 assessments, and more recently, through a May 2008 re-validation assessment conducted by USAID/AFR and a Management Sciences International (MSI) consultant, a professor of Islamic Studies at Colby College. This 2008 re-validation assessment identified changes in the political context and in the terrorism threat level. These changes will affect the core programmatic elements of the USAID TSCTP Mauritania activity, and may result in minor contractual changes to the project. Suggested programmatic changes include: reinvigoration of youth and culture centers in target areas of intervention; cross-cutting anticorruption activities throughout the project; broadening of media activities to include a wider variety of voices and outlets is also a serious consideration.

Evolution of the Political Context

17. (SBU) This assessment found that since 2006, many factors have contributed to the new political environment. Most significant was the arrival of Mauritania's first democratically-elected government through 2006 legislative and 2007 presidential elections. While challenged by economic and political constraints, the new democratic movement has allowed for unprecedented open debate on previously taboo social and political issues -- including open debate on internal extremism. Meanwhile, the 2008 USAID assessment found that religiosity has visibly and steadily

increased in Mauritania, as evidenced by a range of behavioral changes, such as an increase in bearded men, veiled women and mosques, and greater societal pressure to prevent practices that are seen as un-Islamic.⁸ While Islam has always played a central role in the lives of Mauritani-ans, the country's tradition of tolerant, pluralistic Maliki and Sufi-inspired Islam appears to be evolving due to infiltration of strict Salafist or Wahhabi ideas. One of the most significant changes noted by the assessment is the greater readiness by the government to recognize that Mauritania's violent extremist problem is not merely imported⁸ from training camps in northern Mali or Algeria) but homegrown as well. The traditional Mauritanian propensity to dismiss the threat of internal violence or radicalization is beginning to dissolve in light of the recent alleged terrorist tasks mentioned above. That said, imported extremism⁸ is still present and must not be neglected. Exported extremism⁸ also appears to be on the rise. The January 23, 2008 AQIM attack on Italian tourists in Mali was carried out by a group that included six Algerians and eight Mauritani-ans.

18. (SBU) In parallel to this grassroots religious phenomenon, President Abdallahi, has also endeavored to project a greater image of religiosity. This has been demonstrated from his highly publicized post-election prayer to building a mosque inside the Presidential Palace and allowing Prime Minister Waghef to appoint Islamist ministers in his first new government (a Salafist imam to the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, and two other well-known Islamists to the two key ministries of Higher Education and Employment, Vocational Training and Insertion). The presence of these three Islamists proved a lightning-rod that, in part, forced the collapse of the first Waghef government. The political unrest over the issue highlights the debate on how best to

deal with those Salafists who are prepared to work within the political system -- with President Abdallahi generally interested in providing fundamentalists a political platform to peacefully express their views while others fear Salafists will necessarily bring down Mauritania's democracy if allowed inside the tent. President Abdellahi's strategy is not without risks. Encouraging broader integration of hardline Islamist thought could create greater freedoms for Islamists to compete in the political process and play by the rules of the game, and such, weakening any threat they may pose. At the same time, it could also help to drive a wedge between traditional religious versus modern religious tendencies, and/or contribution to a steady radicalization of society. This risk may be hedged in a variety of ways. The assessment found that perhaps the best way may be if the modern, extremist Islam spokespeople speak out against violence, given their increased visibility within society, and the penetration of Salafi-Wahhabi ideas into the Islamic mainstream. This would likely be most effective if dynamic Salafist youth leaders made these anti-violence proclamations.

USAID,s TSCTP project target) at-risk youth

19. (SBU) The USAID assessment found no surprises in the profile of the most vulnerable population, as identified through a variety of interviews, included the following characteristics: male urban youth 15) 25 years of age; second- or first-generation urban dwellers living in poor neighborhoods, but not necessarily the neighborhood,s poorest resident; most were born in and live in peri-urban areas in and around Nouakchott; socially isolated, lacking structure, direction, social support networks and sources of positive encouragement; and attainment of a modest educational level, most having completed primary school; most have attended mahadra (religious school) education system; perception of pervasive injustice and psychological transposition of jihadist ideology on local conflicts or disputes; approximately two thirds are unemployed; the majority have been accused of illegal acts ranging from

illegal drug peddling, to car theft, to basic petty criminal activity; most use a strict interpretation of Islam as a conduit for redemption and spiritual salvation; and finally, although the vast majority are men, the role of women as communicators and mobilizers should not be discounted. The USAID 2008 assessment found that the factors that push vulnerable individuals towards a path of violence are, as the SNLT identified: high levels of social fragmentation and societal decay evidenced by one of the highest divorce rates on the continent; widespread resentment at the perceived dysfunction of the GIRM; and the economic failure of the Mauritanian economy to provide jobs and other opportunities for vulnerable, alienated youth all provide a fertile environment for radical extremist and terrorist ideas to flourish. Additionally, the two factors that attract at-risk individuals appear to be: the pervasiveness and appeal of criminal networks and activities; and the existence of &violence entrepreneurs8 and &violent voices8 (radical Salafi preachers) who prey on youth.

What,s Next?

¶10. (SBU) Although only in its initial stages of administrative set-up, the USAID TSCTP project in Mauritania aims to address the root social and economic causes of terrorism and extremism in Mauritania as identified by the GIRM and the USG. The convergence of the GIRM National Counterterrorism Strategy and the USAID TSCTP strategy mark the start of what will be a cooperative team effort on the civilian side of the equation. The USAID program will begin only in three geographic areas (Nouakchott, Zouerate, and Nema) and will never reach the size to address all the infrastructure issues that would be included in the GIRM strategy. Three growing needs which are only summarily addressed in the USAID project are: infrastructure, material resources and anti-corruption programming.

o First, a top priority for additional support should be youth center infrastructure and resource needs. Youth and cultural centers, once vibrant platforms for positive social and cultural communication and distraction through sports, music and theater, have fallen into significant disrepair across the country. The Mayor of Nouakchott raised this as the single most important factor he saw in leading to youth extremism. The youth center in F,Derick was literally taken over by goats and a thick layer of sand. The youth center in Nema has a roof that is falling in, and a sports field so rugged and dangerous, that at least one youth has died there. In addition to sports fields and center re-building, all could use more resources, including books, audio-visuals and professional support and events programming. The story is repeated in all major towns.

o Second, traditional koranic schools, mahadras, are in desperate need of infrastructure support. Under the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, they are run largely from fees collected from parents. In Zouerate, nearly 80% of the youth attend a mahdras either full-time or concomitantly with regular state-run school, for example attending mahadras as a before-school and after school activity. The vast majority of mahdras do not have running water or electricity. Most are so poor that they are obliged to combine boys and girls in an effort to share and conserve modest resources) from books to toilets.

o Third, water is a prevalent need, and devastating to youth and communities alike. The water table in the F,Derick area is more than 25 meters, and what water there is, is salty. Bir Moghreïn, north-west of F,Derick, has collaborated with the government to acquire a water filtration system, however there is no electricity in Bir Morgrein and the system will be run using a diesel electrical generator. Needless to say there are no gas stations in Bir Moghreïn and the budget for transporting diesel is slim. In Nema, the water situation is also serious. Belgian and Saudi-financed water projects exist around the outskirts of the town, water resources

in-town are precarious at best. There is no water much more frequently than not.

o A fourth, yet non-infrastructure need, is anti-corruption activities. As more donor and private sector funds come into the country, more needs to be done to combat a rapidly rising World Bank-assessed level of corruption. USAID programming will only scratch the surface of what is becoming a more and more deeply rooted problem among youth and the nation as a whole.

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Other Donors throw their hat in the ring
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¶11. (SBU) Since the first TSCTP assessment in 2005, other donors have recognized the need for social and economic programming to address the root causes of terrorism in Mauritania, however few as explicitly as USAID. UNDP is increasingly concerned with anti-extremism programming -- always couched under the "Good Governance" rubrik. The European Union recently sent a counterterrorism programming assessment team to Mauritania. Any resulting programming, however, could take over a year to initiate. The French are involved along the perimeter of at-risk youth and community development. The French Cooperation has developed a community action planning and development program that is expected to launch in Nouakchott in October 2008. The Agence Francaise de Developpement (French Development Agency) is involved with vocational technical training of youth in Zouerate. Likewise, the Qatari Cooperation (Etablissement Qatari-Mauritanien pour le Developpement Social) is not only involved in vocational training in Nema, but is also curiously implementing an entire infrastructural re-vamping of Boutelimit town, a town which is widely believed to harbor extremist thought leaders. Neither the French nor the Qataris publicly declare their activities to be counter-terrorist or)extremist in nature.

Reality check

¶12. (SB) The situation in Mauritania is evolving, both politically and economically. The US can only do so much. What was once a sleepy town, back as recently as 2005 when the initial TSCTP assessments were conducted, Nouakchott is now becoming a bustling center where &terrorism8 is a common word. Unlike many countries in the region, the Mauritians are prepared to speak frankly of the terrorist threat -- both internal and external -- however, the root causes of external extremism are in many ways the greatest economic and social challenges facing Mauritania.

Boulware